

## **House of Commons Hansard**

### **Report on the Debate on the Effect of Aircraft Noise on Local Communities**

#### **Held at Westminster Hall**

20 April 2016, 9.30 am

#### **Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con)**

I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of aircraft noise on local communities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. The revolution in air travel has been one of the great liberations of the British people. Since the birth of Her Majesty 90 years ago tomorrow, the Wright brothers' miracle has become the norm. Everyone, from families heading for a week in the sun to businesspeople trading across our globe, flies across our skies. That freedom to travel is one that I and many people whom I have the privilege to represent have used many times. It is a blessing to many but, as so often in the Kentish sky, behind the silver lining there is a cloud, because although airlines carry passengers away to other places, they condemn the citizens beneath these aerial motorways to lives of misery and the oppression of noise.

The balance between the needs of settled communities and travelling folk is as old as the Bible. The novelty here is that the two communities are often one and the same. The very people who are disturbed often use aircraft themselves, so the question for this debate is not whether we should ground all aircraft or close all airports, which would be absurd, but how we manage our airspace as a precious resource for the benefit of everyone.

Today, I will not address the questions of second or third runways at Gatwick or Heathrow because, although I can see the merits of increasing our connections with our region and the world, restating Britain's position at the heart of a series of networks and at the heart of a global community, I am waiting for the decision to come out in the best interests of our economy, so I will not argue for the merits of one or the other. I will also not be praising any particular carrier, airport or agency because, again, this is not the time to engage in what some would call the "politics of condemnation."

This debate is about getting change, getting understanding and, most importantly, getting to a stage where our nation can invest for the long term in our air infrastructure on the same basis as we would our ground connections, which means openly, after due consideration and taking into account the needs of our whole community. That is why I am particularly pleased to see many of my parliamentary neighbours here this morning. My right hon. Friends the Members for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), and my hon. Friends the Members for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) and for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), are all here, and we have been fighting together on many of these campaigns.

I will begin by setting out what I hope to achieve. I thank the Minister, who has been incredibly helpful on the question of aviation noise, but today I would like him to do a few things. First, I would like him to clarify the position of Her Majesty's Government on the term "significantly

affected.” That vague term has caused difficulty for airports and agencies in designing flightpaths that cause the least disturbance. Secondly, I would like the outdated Environmental Protection Act 1990 to be refreshed so that aircraft noise is regulated in the same way as other disturbances, taking into account ambient noise so that the relative difference, as well as the absolute decibel level, is taken into consideration.

**Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con)**

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I offer my support on the issue of ambient noise, because in rural communities where noise levels are low the concentration of flights that often happens as a result of the new digital navigation technology means that the disruption now being caused from Gatwick can be great. Does that not need to be taken into account when considering flightpaths over areas that already have a high level of ambient noise and would therefore be disrupted less by such concentration?

**Tom Tugendhat**

My right hon. Friend makes a good point, to which I will return. Technology is now evolving that allows us to calculate the difference between background or ambient noise and the relative change.

Thirdly, I ask the Minister to demand that the Civil Aviation Authority takes noise disturbance into account and includes communities not just 10 nautical miles but 18 nautical miles from airports so that due consideration is given to local communities that are affected, not just those that neighbour the airport, when planning airspace.

Fourthly and, the Minister will be pleased to hear, lastly, I would like the angle of approach to be reviewed. Modern aircraft are able to approach runways more steeply than the current 3°. London City airport, which I have used many times, has an approach angle of 5.5° to protect the buildings of our great capital. Could the same not apply to protect heritage sites and communities in the glorious county of Kent? This is not about aircraft or runways but about using airspace in everyone’s best interest. In my community, near Gatwick airport, the air corridor was changed in 2013. Since then, complaints have increased ninefold, and it is the failure to manage the airspace properly, not the raw numbers, that has caused the problem, but it is worth considering some of the numbers that do affect us.

More than 1 million people in the United Kingdom are exposed to aircraft noise above healthy levels. In the short term, that leads to loss of sleep and annoyance, and it makes it harder for children to learn, but the long-term effects can be worse still. High blood pressure, heart disease, heart attacks, strokes and dementia have all been associated with exposure to excessive noise. Indeed, the World Health Organisation recommends that such noise levels at school playgrounds should not exceed 55 dB. In my area, and in the area around Gatwick, 15 schools are already exposed to such levels, and nine are overflown more than 20 times a day. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said, the ability to assess noise is one that we must take seriously if we are to move on from the 1990 Act. The National Physical Laboratory suggests that monitors costing only £100 could be fitted to tell regulators the exact pressure being put on residents, which is a game-changing moment for all. For the first time, we can have accurate monitoring not just of the peak noise but of the relative change, because by monitoring the ambient noise we can see that not all are equally affected.

### **Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con)**

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate, and I share his views. When I first became a Member of Parliament representing Crawley 33 years ago, British Caledonian flew the BAC 111, which was one of the noisiest aeroplanes - it was just appalling. One of aviation's arguments is that the quality of noise is now very different, but the point that he and my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) make about ambient noise is terribly important because, although the technologies are infinitely improved, the noise is still immensely disruptive. It is no good saying that that is just the way it is.

### **Tom Tugendhat**

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The improvement in the quality of aircraft is noticeable, but that is not enough on its own. The change from a rural idyll to an aerial motorway in a few moments can be particularly stark, and never more so than at night. Perhaps the Minister would like to explain why night flights are banned from some airports but not from others, such as Gatwick.

This debate is not just about enjoying lazy summer afternoons in the garden of England, although that is a treasured blessing, and I intend to do as much of it as I can, parliamentary duties permitting; it is about the health of our nation. That does not tell the whole story. Noise, as measured today, does not take into account the full impact. The Civil Aviation Authority's aircraft noise contour model - a model with which you are no doubt incredibly familiar, Mr Howarth - measures only average noise for the 10 noisiest seconds. This is perhaps not always recognised, but it is a secret that I am willing to share with the House: aircraft move. That means that the average is significantly below the peak level, which is counted only 2.5 km from the rolling point of the aircraft. Many people in Kent, particularly in my communities and in the communities of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells, are badly affected and are simply not counted. That is not sensible. When a road is planned or a railway is considered, all those affected have a voice. It seems that communities are only ignored when it comes to overhead infrastructure.

The lack of guidance has allowed the Civil Aviation Authority and National Air Traffic Services to narrow the flightpaths, as they have done in the past few years over Gatwick, and increase the intensity of aircraft movements for those beneath. Some would say that they were using modern technology to demonstrate that they could increase capacity and perhaps even expand their operations; far be it from me to predict such things.

This is an area where we could and indeed should change things. That is why I ask for clarity from the Government on what reducing the numbers who are "significantly affected" means. Does it mean sharing the burden so that many are affected but not significantly, or does it mean placing the burden on the narrowest shoulders so that the fewest people are affected, but those who are affected will be severely impacted and their lives transformed? That guidance should be given to our planners. It would be given if they were planners on the ground, and it should be given to planners in the air.

**Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con)**

I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising this important matter. All of us who have close interest in inland airports know the huge difficulties that exist; we are only in the mitigation game and it is very important that these matters are illuminated. However, is not the tragedy relating to the point he just made about planning that we forwent the opportunity in the mid-1970s to proceed with an estuarial airport, which would have brought great relief? It is where airports are put that creates the problems with which he is grappling.

**Tom Tugendhat**

I thank my right hon. Friend very much for his intervention. As a Member of this House, I have become used to taking responsibility for many things that are not directly my fault, but I hope he will forgive me for not taking responsibility for decisions taken in this House before I was born. I recognise that the need for long-term planning is one of the issues that, sadly, we have often got wrong in this country, and it is one reason why we now find ourselves causing damage to certain communities and asking certain small communities to bear the burden of economic expansion and its benefits for the whole nation. I thank my right hon. Friend very much for making that point.

Given that we are asking regulators to look around our communities, it would be good if the Civil Aviation Authority not only took account of areas that are 10 nautical miles away from airports but, as I have said, those that are 18 nautical miles away. Mr Chairman, you may ask, “Why double, or almost double, that distance?” It is because that is the point at which most airports begin to take control of aircraft, at the limit of the radar manoeuvring area, as it is known. That would mean the CAA and NATS would be regulated not only to make

“the most efficient use of airspace”

by maximising flights and fuel efficiency but to control noise and to recognise the impact on communities on the ground.

No agency is responsible for long-term reduction in noise, and I hope the Government now recognise the need to task the CAA and NATS to take on that role, because although aircraft have become quieter and airports are beginning to behave themselves a little, it seems to me that this is an opportunity for the Government to step in and take the lead.

**Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con)**

I would very much like to second that point; in fact, I have made it myself in previous debates in the main Chamber. However, does my hon. Friend agree that at the heart of this problem, particularly in Bracknell, is the fact that there has been a breakdown in trust in the organisations responsible for the management of air traffic, including over my constituency? In my part of the world, the situation has totally changed in recent years and there was no prior warning of it; indeed, it has taken a great deal of time and persistence to get NATS to admit that it has changed things.

My hon. Friend began his speech by talking about the need for change, and we all accept that there will be an increase in flight traffic over the south-east of England. However, is it not important that all the people involved - the Government and indeed the agencies that are responsible - begin telling the truth in advance, so that we can take the public with us?

## **Tom Tugendhat**

My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and indeed the reason I got involved in this fight was because of the sudden change that I saw in the skies over Kent because of what Gatwick had done.

I admit that this is a slight diversion, but the first thing that people did in relation to Gatwick was to deny that they had done anything; they denied that aircraft were changing their flight approaches in any way or that the airspace was being shaped any differently. I would argue that it was that deception that did the most damage. If they had been able to admit early on that there had indeed been a change, that NATS had indeed changed the approach and that Gatwick was indeed trying different things, we could at least have had a conversation. However, when they did it overnight in 2013 and then denied that they had done so, the breakdown in trust was such that even though Gatwick is now leading with the Redeborn and Lake review, which I will come on to, and, I would argue, leading best practice on how an airport should communicate with its neighbours, it will be a good number of years before many of us will have confidence that Gatwick can be a good neighbour. I am saddened to hear that there are other airports in this country that have behaved similarly.

That is why, as many people know, I have welcomed many times the review that was carried out by Bo Redeborn and Graham Lake, because they have introduced a change in policy; indeed, their 23 proposals have been put forward in a policy vacuum. It would be wrong to say that those proposals have all been implemented; they certainly have not been, although we hope that 20 of them will be implemented by the end of the year and that we will begin to see the change that we absolutely need in the skies above south-east England. However, it is only through that dialogue, which Redeborn and Lake both strongly recommend, that we will see that change not only embedded but recognised and appreciated. Sadly, if we keep getting the dishonesty - or at least the dissembling - that we have seen, we will not have the level of trust required to build a better community.

I again urge NATS to take forward the Gatwick review and take the opportunity to use it as an example for the rest of the country, because what Gatwick has done is truly ground-breaking. We are waiting for NATS to implement the review; at the moment, NATS is slightly struggling with it, but I urge it to stop that struggle and get on with it.

Airports are not alone and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex has mentioned, aircraft have changed. The infamous whine generated by the Airbus A320 demonstrates that airlines also have a responsibility. EasyJet has finally decided that the minor modifications that are required will all be in place very shortly, and Gatwick has decided that no aircraft without those modifications will be able to land after 2017. While it is welcome that both the airline and the airport are making those changes, I am somewhat disappointed that the Government have not applied that to the whole of the United Kingdom. It seems wrong that only we should benefit, and those changes could be made today.

There are further changes that could be made and I have touched on one of them, which is the angle of approach. It is worth noting that Frankfurt airport has now increased the approach angle from 3° to 3.2°. That may sound like a minor change, but anything that keeps aircraft higher for

longer makes a huge difference to communities beneath. If we can get to the 5.5° of London City airport, we will start to get somewhere.

None of this, I should emphasise, is anything like the hairy approaches that one used to take to get into Baghdad or Kabul, corkscrewing down through the skies to avoid incoming missiles; the approaches that I am proposing are rather more gentle. Modern aircraft can handle them and the communities beneath would benefit greatly.

I thank Members who have come to the Chamber to support the motion, because communities affected, including those significantly affected in my own area - in Cowden, Hever, Edenbridge, Chiddingstone, Penshurst, Leigh and Tonbridge - deserve clarity. Those communities, and a few others, have been left to shoulder this burden alone.

As I have said, this debate is not about whether another runway should go to Heathrow or Gatwick, or whether we need extra capacity. I make a simple request that Her Majesty's Government should recognise that when motorways are built, they are debated, and when railways are built, they are considered and assessed, so when motorways in the sky are placed over people's homes, the planning requirements should be no different.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)**

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. First, I thank the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for setting out the case. I want to bring a Northern Ireland perspective to the debate. We have three airports in Northern Ireland: Belfast City, Belfast International, or Aldergrove, and Londonderry City. I want to focus specifically on Belfast City airport and some of the things we have done in Northern Ireland. This matter is devolved to Northern Ireland, but Belfast City is an ongoing issue. Just yet, we have not concluded what the best way forward is.

Through the Assembly and elected representatives, we in Northern Ireland are very conscious of the issue of airport noise. It was useful that the hon. Gentleman set the scene for us, because we need to hear from other Members and compare the approach taken by central Government with the one taken in Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, the most notable case of aircraft noise having an impact on local communities is that of George Best Belfast City airport. That is the one I use to go to Heathrow and then to London and the House of Commons every week. The airport has transformed from a secondary and relatively small regional airport into a hub of Greater Belfast offering flights once unthought of. With its renovation, it is competing with Belfast International for certain routes. As my party's transport spokesperson, I have always said that we are keen to see connectivity being achieved from Belfast City to Heathrow and then to wherever else that can lead to in the world. That is so important for us, and I know the Minister is industrious and considers how important Belfast City is for us.

Although the expansion and success of the airport have brought clear benefits, not least to the local economy and regeneration of the area, there has been conflict. Despite tight restrictions on the times flights are permitted in and out of the airport, local residents are undoubtedly affected. With further expansion planned - it has been discussed; as I have said, nothing is agreed yet - and amendments to the current noise procedures, concerns have surfaced once again.

Hypertension and insomnia are the most established conditions associated with night-time flying. Although there are time restrictions, night-time flying has the potential to affect those who work shifts or have young children. These stats are ones that the airport agrees with. It says that up to 46,000 people and 21 schools could be affected by the changes proposed for the expansion of Belfast City, and that obviously needs to be taken into account. It is always a difficult one - we do not want to stand in the way of progress, but at the same time we do not want the lives of people who have lived in a certain area their whole lives turned upside down. Those are clear issues, and I am duty-bound to come here today and make those clear comments on behalf of those people.

In 2014, the number of people affected by Belfast City airport's operations at the level considered by the UK Government to cause serious community annoyance was 4,107. To give Members some idea of what that means, that was greater than Gatwick airport at 3,550 and Stansted airport at 1,400. If the proposals for Belfast City airport go ahead and noise levels rise to their permitted maximum, it will become the fourth noisiest airport in the UK in terms of population impact. Only Heathrow, Manchester and Birmingham would affect more people at or above the Government's "significant annoyance" threshold. We in Northern Ireland, where the matter is devolved, have the responsibility to look after that threshold. When we are moving forward, we have to remember that things do not have to have a health impact to have adverse effects on the community. People who live in a certain area and have put down roots and invested their income in their home may, through no choice of their own, be directly affected.

Having said that, I read with interest the Airports Commission's July 2013 aviation noise discussion paper, which found that 4.2 million people are exposed to road traffic noise of 65 dB or more. Let us get some perspective into the debate. The paper found that the corresponding figures for railways and aviation are 0.2 million people and 0.07 million people respectively. So in relative terms, aircraft noise itself has very little impact, but it is still important that those impacted and their viewpoints are respected. It is not just the health issues I have mentioned that are important.

**David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP)**

With all the figures and statistics that my hon. Friend has outlined in relation to health problems, difficulties, the built-up area and the number of people, is the bottom line that Belfast will not be able to expand because of its location?

**Jim Shannon**

I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. The serious question for us all - I am trying to get a balance in my contribution - is whether we have the airport expansion. Should it happen? Can it happen in such a way that is not detrimental to the 46,000 people and 21 schools around the airport that are potentially directly impacted? He is right. The issue he raises is the kernel of this debate.

George Best Belfast City airport could become one of the UK's five noisiest airports if the controversial expansion plans get the go-ahead. That is a key point. Residents want an independent aircraft noise regulator for Northern Ireland to be appointed and robust noise fines for airlines. If that is what residents want, who could argue with that? Such a proposal seems well-intended, but we have to be careful about unintended consequences. We do not want

hard-won business to be put off from continuing to do business in our airports by feeling overregulated. It is about striking a balance. The Minister needs the wisdom of Solomon in relation to this one. If he had the wisdom of Solomon he would be a very wise man and he would have more than just a ministerial role in the Department he is looking after at the moment.

The Planning Appeals Commission report on the Belfast City expansion recommended that the removal of the seats for sale restriction should be accompanied by additional noise controls. That is one of the things that the commission is looking at. The process is ongoing, but it has shown that comprehensive consultation that includes all stakeholders can help to facilitate the right balance being struck between supporting enterprise and business and supporting local residents and ensuring that they are taken care of. In Northern Ireland, we are looking at an airports strategy for the Province to provide the right balance between the commercial interests of airports - that is important for jobs, money and the economy - and the health and quality of life of local residents, but we are still in the midst of consultation and the saga at Belfast City airport goes on.

In conclusion, I look forward to hearing from other Members who will bring their own contributions to this debate and their experiences in their regions.

**Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP)**

Just before my hon. Friend finishes, does he agree that, on the issue of noise reduction, the Government generally could do much to assist the development of the C Series by Bombardier, which is an exceptionally quiet aircraft? If that were rolled out and developed more systematically, that would go some way to alleviating the noise concerns for residents, particularly those under the flight path.

**Jim Shannon**

I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and his wise words. His contributions are always worth listening to. Can the Minister say what discussions have taken place with aircraft companies on noise reduction? I know that Bombardier is working on that with the C Series, but other companies are probably doing so, too. We need to see the contributions of the aircraft companies and manufacturers.

I once more thank the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling for giving us a chance to participate in this debate and to offer a Belfast and Northern Ireland perspective. I hope the wise words of other Members will add to the debate, too.

**Mr George Howarth (in the Chair)**

I intend to start calling the three Front Benchers at 10.30. The normal convention is to leave some time for the mover of the motion to say a few words at the end. I have five Back Benchers who have indicated that they want to speak. I am hoping not to need to impose a formal time limit, but informally, if people do the maths, it works out at about six minutes for each speaker, which should be ample.

**Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con)**

I congratulate my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this debate. It is unfortunate that we are here again discussing an issue that is important to our constituents.

Aircraft noise is incredibly damaging, disturbing and stressful for various communities in the northern part of my constituency. Constituents regularly email me, and this week I had an email that is like many others:

“We have been woken on many nights in the early hours at 1.30 or 2.30 am, as well as suffering the usual stream of planes from before 6 am”.

It continues throughout.

“As a result, despite sleeping with ear plugs, neither of us is now a good sleeper and this has definitely affected our health.”

Constituents in Groombridge wrote in to describe how they

“absolutely dread being at home. We cannot sleep. We live constantly stressed and strained lives. It is so bad, we are seriously considering giving up jobs, schools and closeness to family to move away.”

This can no longer be dismissed as a minor issue. It is a very serious issue that needs to be taken seriously by airports and air traffic authorities.

Over the past few months, I have been grateful for the opportunity to contribute to Gatwick’s review of westerly arrivals. Last year, I held a packed community meeting where constituents were able to vent their frustration about noise pollution to the authors of the review. Earlier this month, I was pleased to join colleagues in welcoming Gatwick’s plan to act on the review’s recommendations and 23 proposals. Those must be implemented quickly, and I and neighbouring MPs will do all that we can to make sure that the process is sped up as fast as possible. I hope the Minister will offer support and assistance so that we can turn the recommendations into reality.

One thing to note is that the whole review and the changes that we expect to result from it will have been a massive waste of time if Gatwick is allowed to expand with a second runway. We will go from 270,000 flights a year to 560,000, with an increase from 325 to around 850 flights a day over Wealden, which means more noise. The areas of outstanding natural beauty that we are all proud of will be even more compromised. The value of our houses will plummet, and, more importantly, the quality of our lives will be further disrupted by noise pollution.

Despite such effects, Gatwick has not committed to any mitigation measures or compensation for Wealden residents in the event of expansion. The compensation package on offer extends only to areas immediately surrounding the airport. Wealden residents, as well as the 20 Wealden schools that would be overflowed, will suffer far greater disruption without receiving a single penny in return. Will the Minister outline what operational mitigation measures have been proposed by Gatwick airport to reduce the effect of aviation noise in the event of expansion, and how does that compare with the measures proposed by Heathrow?

The proposed changes to arrival routes at Gatwick are very welcome and we will do all we can to make them a reality as quickly as possible. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the

bigger picture and the appalling consequences that expansion at Gatwick would have for our constituents because of aircraft noise.

**Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab)**

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing the debate. I agree with him that we should not turn this into a debate about where the additional runway in the south-east should go, and I agree that aircraft noise is a problem for every individual and every family affected by it. Those of us whose constituents are affected will understand that.

I will mention a statistic that bears repetition whenever we debate airport expansion, and particularly the issue of noise. It is a problem for every individual who suffers from it, but one has to also look at the quantum of the damage that is done. Some 725,000 people are affected by aircraft noise around Heathrow - it accounts for 28.5% of all those affected by aircraft noise in Europe. That one statistic should have settled the debate about airport expansion in the south-east many years ago. By comparison, 0.5% of people around Gatwick are affected by aircraft noise. I do not diminish that, and I understand that, although there are queries over the figures, the number of people affected around Gatwick would go up from roughly 12,000 to roughly 35,000 or 36,000 if there were expansion there. I have seen various figures for Heathrow, but Transport for London says that the number of people affected would go up to about 1 million if there were expansion there. Others say the number will go up by about 320,000. In other words, the increase would be 10 to 20 times that suffered by people around Gatwick. The reason for that is fairly obvious: Heathrow is in the wrong place and is directly adjacent to some of the most densely populated urban areas in this country.

**Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con)**

I hope the hon. Gentleman accepts that the impact of ambient noise has a profound impact on one's experience of aircraft noise.

**Andy Slaughter**

It does, but I took slight umbrage at the point that was made in an earlier contribution about those living in rural areas suffering more because they have a quieter environment. Urban areas that are not affected by aircraft noise at the moment, but will be affected for the first time, will also suffer greatly, particularly outside peak hours in the early morning and later at night. Some urban areas, including parts of my constituency, are extremely quiet and will be affected by noise for the first time.

**Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con)**

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that an ambient noise of, say, 30 dB will lead to an endocrine autonomic effect, which will only be compounded by a level of 55 dB or even 83dB, as is the case with some flights? He probably has the same flights over Hammersmith that I have over Twickenham. Does he also agree that, medically, it is the children who suffer most?

**Andy Slaughter**

I am grateful to the hon. Lady. Her technical knowledge exceeds mine, but she is absolutely right. Friends of the Earth, for example, contends that it is misleading to talk about the noise energy emitted by planes being reduced, which is what Heathrow says will happen. According to

Heathrow, fewer people will be affected by noise when the third runway is built, when 250,000 additional flights are going over west London and there will be an increase in activity of just under 50%. I do not know anybody who actually believes that apart from the people who spin for Heathrow, but, as Friends of the Earth says, even if there is a decrease in noise energy emitted by planes, that is only loosely linked to human perception of noise, and a 50% reduction in noise energy is only just detectable by the human ear.

Even if there are quieter aircraft and noise is reduced generally, it will still disproportionately affect those who live around Heathrow, because of the massive number of people affected. Any benefit will be gained by people around other airports.

### **Tom Tugendhat**

The hon. Gentleman is making interesting points, but does he recognise that the problem affects the whole United Kingdom? We have heard comments from Belfast and will no doubt hear comments from Scotland. We should work together to create a level playing field of understanding, so that the planning for another runway in Perthshire or in Penzance is the same as it would be for Gatwick or Heathrow. At least we would then have some common understanding of the impact on the community beneath, and decisions could be taken in a fair and equitable manner and not just on the basis of who shouts loudest and longest.

### **Andy Slaughter**

I agree with that. One still has to bear in mind that if a third runway is built - I declare an interest, because the Airports Commission's preferred option will run directly over central Hammersmith - whole new communities, and populous communities, will be affected for the first time. As a report published earlier this year shows, 460 schools around Heathrow are exposed to aircraft noise levels that may impair learning and memory. The health consequences include higher risk of strokes, heart disease and cardiovascular problems. Hundreds of thousands of people could be affected by those serious problems.

I particularly want to hear from the Minister about the review of night flights. The existing regulations end in 2017, so when are we going to have a consultation? Will the Minister condemn Heathrow for not even saying, as the Airports Commission recommended, that there should be a ban on night flights and that a fourth runway should be ruled out? Those are the concerns going forward.

Those of us who have battled Heathrow expansion for 30 years - the current expansion is always the last one - will never believe any promises the airport makes. We want to see the decision made in such a way that the Government are accountable to Members from all parties. Above all, whatever the effects of airport expansion, we want to see them mitigated, not only by improved technology but by reducing the number of people affected.

### **Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con)**

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this incredibly important debate. I agree with him that there is an absolute need for change, but where I disagree is that I do think that a lot of condemnation is due. That is where I agree with the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). As he said, 725,000 people are affected by Heathrow, which

means that, of all the people in Europe who are affected by noise pollution, 28% live under a Heathrow flight path.

I hope the Minister will take on board what my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee) said, because there is no trust in the information that communities are being given and in the action the airports are taking to alleviate such a serious medical issue. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani). I, too, have to wear earplugs, which I did not have to do a few years ago. Things have changed and we are being woken up at 4 in the morning. There is noise late at night and at all kinds of hours. There is no mitigation for night flights - none is possible.

I mentioned condemnation because Heathrow affects more people than the airports of Paris, Frankfurt, Amsterdam and Madrid combined. That is why it is such an urgent problem, both environmentally and medically. I hope that the Minister will take that on board. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling said, we do have medical evidence. We know that there is a direct correlation between noise pollution and cardiovascular events. We also know from the World Health Organisation that seven categories of medical problems are associated with noise pollution, so it is a very serious problem. As I said in an intervention on the hon. Member for Hammersmith, ambient noise does not make people less sensitive to noise. Ambient noise is a problem in itself; it provides no mitigation.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling for mentioning the National Physical Laboratory, which is a world leader in noise measurement. I hope that the Minister will look into citizen scientists, because we need the community to be able to measure noise pollution. I believe that the NPL is close to giving us ways of measuring that are accessible for the community. The LAeq measurement is an average; it does not take night flights into account. The other decibel measurement, Lden, is an average over 24 hours. The medical problem relates to when the noise happens, its peak and its irregularity, so the existing measurements are not meaningful for the communities that are disrupted by aircraft noise. As the hon. Member for Hammersmith and I have said, 725,000 people are currently affected by Heathrow; goodness knows, that number will be more than 1 million if there is expansion at the airport.

I agree with my hon. Friends the Members for Bracknell and for Tonbridge and Malling that there is no trust and that there is dissemblance in the information provided. I notice that my local community group, Teddington Action Group, has reported that there is now a serious problem with planes flying at lower angles over longer distances, earlier in the morning and later at night. It is a serious trend. I am grateful to the action group for working out, with the publicly available data, that Heathrow is only just meeting its legal requirements, which are not adequate anyway. I agree with the action group that, rather than aircraft having 6.5 km to reach 1,000 feet, they should be at 2,500 feet at that point. The minimum climb rate of 4% to an altitude of 4,000 feet should be increased to a rate of 4% up to 6,000 feet.

I humbly request that the Minister meets me to discuss the review that is needed of the noise notice around Heathrow airport. I would be very grateful if he did so, given the incredible work that my community has done and what our Twickenham expertise can do with the NPL. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling that noise should be considered a statutory nuisance. The Environmental Protection Act 1990 should be changed to reflect that.

I absolutely condemn what is going on right now, and I also condemn the dissembling. Change is needed, because no mitigation is possible for the levels of noise pollution that are affecting my idyll of Twickenham.

**Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab)**

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I thank the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for securing this debate.

My constituency lies under the final approach path for Heathrow for the 70% of the time that the airport is on westerly operations. The area is fully built up beneath those flight paths, as passengers sitting by the aircraft windows will be well aware. My constituency is the second most overflowed constituency in London. Most of the 94,000 residents of Brentford and Isleworth are affected by aircraft noise, with a plane taking off or landing every 60 to 90 seconds. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said, according to figures from the European Commission, 725,000 people across London and the south-east are significantly affected by noise from aircraft using Heathrow.

I have some quotes from some of my constituents. Carol Petersen said:

“Although I live in Chiswick and therefore not in the immediate vicinity of the airport, I should like to record the effect of night noise in this area. This morning several came past at 5 am and we could not get back to sleep. The impact is significant. We can tolerate this during the day, but when sleep patterns are ruined it is very difficult.”

Basia Filzec lives a lot closer to the airport and said:

“Heathrow has always been a very poor neighbour. Apart from the noise and the smell, first flights are around 4.30 am and there are some night flights. When I was working it was very distressing to have to go to work not having had enough sleep. It made the job even more stressful.”

My constituent Diane wrote:

“We have endured weeks of flights past 11 pm and before 6 am (sometimes at 3.40 am). To be a reasonable neighbour Heathrow needs to ensure that we get 9 hours per night free of this noise so we stand a chance of getting 8 hours sleep. On two nights last week we only had 5 hours’ break - impossible to live or work effectively when sleep deprived. I am sure that those areas closer to the landing site suffer even more.”

More than 90% of children educated in the London Borough of Hounslow’s schools, nurseries and colleges are directly affected by aircraft noise. A school in Hounslow will be overflowed at least every 90 seconds. Noise level is significantly related to children’s mathematical performance. As noise increases by contour band, performance drops by 0.73 of a mark. Schools exposed to high levels of aircraft noise near Heathrow have more than the average number of children with English as a second language. In addition, there is increasing evidence of the impact of noise on health - including on cardiovascular health, strokes and mental health - which will lead to a massive cost to the public purse and the economy.

I agree with the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling about the need for a public debate about flight routes and approach methods, but in my constituency the planes are on their final approach, so their routes cannot be varied. Steeper glide paths might actually increase the noise levels for those closest to the airport as the planes throttle back.

We have some mitigations, but they are frequently not met. There are not supposed to be night flights before 4 am, and the approach paths to Heathrow on the westerly approach should be alternated for half of the day, but those measures are often breached. The airport contributes to the cost of insulation and ventilation in some existing school buildings, but only those in the very noisiest areas. It covers nothing like all those affected, and no new school buildings have been insulated or improved by the Heathrow scheme.

My constituents look forward to the promised quieter planes, to full alternation, to decent insulation and to a ban on night flights so they can have some semblance of normal life and can sleep through the night more often and wake up fresher the next day. They do not want the 46% increase in flights that a third runway would mean.

**Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con)**

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this debate. He, like me, has many constituents who live in rural communities, where the lower ambient noise makes the experience of aircraft hugely oppressive.

Gatwick is surrounded on three sides by areas of outstanding natural beauty. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) said, the impact of Gatwick on the otherwise tranquil environment of large swathes of both of our constituencies is immense. In such conditions, noise can be experienced over a wide field - some 3.5 to 5 miles either side of the aircraft. The concentration of noise in quiet environments is not properly recognised by the existing standard industry metrics, which measure noise over 24 hours. In some parts of my constituency, the rate of take-offs has resulted in a relentless wall of noise, which is a pressing problem for my constituents.

I wish to focus on the issues that are being experienced right now, but, with great respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, no debate on aircraft noise would be complete without a reference to runway expansion. If the Government were to go against the clear recommendation of the Davies commission and make what to my mind is the wrong decision on runway expansion, the number of flights over my constituency would double to up to 560,000 per year. Aircraft movements would become more concentrated on existing flightpaths, and two new flightpaths would be created over Cophorne and Crawley Down. The villages of Ruspur and Cophorne would be taken within the standard noise contours for Gatwick. Ruspur would be overflown by more than 300 easterly arrivals a day to the southern runway and more than 300 westerly departures using two routes from the same runway. Warnham and Slinfold would experience 150-plus concentrated departures per day, and Billingshurst would be affected by the massive increase in aircraft approaching both runways. The list goes on. I will not mention every single village in my constituency that would be adversely affected, because they all would be.

As the Davies commission pointed out,

“Knowing that aviation noise will be limited to certain times of the day is very important to many people.”

That is something on which I have common cause with the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias). With that in mind, I am horrified that Gatwick’s post-expansion proposal is to operate both runways for take-offs and landings throughout the day, offering no period for respite - not even during the night. Night flights are incentivised by Gatwick’s charging structure. That is a nightmarish vision of the future.

However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani) so eloquently set out, the present has its own severe problems. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, I welcome the independent arrivals review that was established by Gatwick. That shows its awareness of the very real concerns of many residents. I hope that the proposed noise management board will maintain that focus and be given real teeth so that it not only brings together stakeholders but makes a genuine impact.

As Gatwick considers its response, I ask that it addresses certain key issues. I have sought and received assurances from the airport that the impact of departures on communities will be taken into account when it determines its position on arrivals. Although the review focused on the latter, rather than the former, it would be wholly unfair and incongruous if attempts to mitigate the impact of aircraft noise were made without a proper appreciation of both arrivals and departures on residents.

The proposed wider swathe for arrivals from the west should result in a fairer distribution of aircraft impact. However, that will not be the case if air traffic control simply allows pilots to come in consistently by the shortest possible route. That will result in a heavy concentration of flights over a small area of my constituency, which is already severely adversely affected by departures. I understand that negotiations on that point are ongoing between Gatwick and NATS. It is an issue on which my constituents want cast-iron guarantees.

I am disappointed that night flights, which hon. Members have already spoken about, were excluded from the Gatwick review. Like the hon. Member for Hammersmith, I look to the Minister for reassurance that the consultation on night flights will be forthcoming this year. On technical innovations, I again look to the Minister to support the principle that noise modifications should be made on time and be effective. As mentioned earlier, Gatwick has a sunset date of the end of 2017 for A320s to be fitted with noise modification. The success of that depends on defaulters being subjected to severe penalties for non-compliance.

Finally - I again look to the Minister on this point - I am saddened that a more innovative approach has not been taken to stacking. As the Minister also has responsibility for shipping, he is more aware than most that we are an island. Could not a way be found to stack aircraft out to sea, rather than, as at present, over residential areas, national parks and areas of outstanding natural beauty?

**Mr George Howarth (in the Chair)**

I call Caroline Spelman. I ask you to bear in mind that I intend to call the Front Benchers at 10.30 am.

**Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con)**

I am extremely grateful to you for allowing me to scrape in under the wire, Mr Howarth, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) for securing this debate.

Birmingham airport is in my constituency. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, it has one of the highest numbers of people affected by aircraft noise, as it is close to the conurbation. Its recent expansion and the lengthening of its runway brought aircraft lower and closer to the populations underneath it. Unfortunately, that coincided with the proposed national flightpath changes. The trials caused a significant increase in noise pollution for the community underneath. The fact that the aircraft could not fly the new routes accurately also caused confusion and dismay. The airport apologised for that, but the community suffered a breach of trust, and good will has been damaged.

The Civil Aviation Authority has now approved the airport's preferred option, but three further mitigations are to be trialled: the angle of descent and ascent will be increased, and different types of aircraft will fly slightly different routes. I suspect that we have some more challenges ahead. The concentration of sound has increased the impact on certain households. The removal of manoeuvres to deflect sound away from communities was disappointing.

Looking ahead, I hope the Minister will recognise the blight that is caused by uncertainty about the proposals to expand airports. Birmingham once proposed a second runway, but has now extended its single runway. It now has the same capacity as Gatwick, but only one third of its passengers. I hope that will put paid to the threat of another runway being proposed in that densely populated location, and I hope the Minister will strongly oppose any suggestion of reopening a second runway proposal at Birmingham.

**Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP)**

I commend and congratulate the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing this important and timely debate on a very important issue for his constituency. He has voiced concern about aircraft noise around Gatwick for some time. Although he was pleased that the Airports Commission recommended Heathrow, he vowed to continue to campaign on the matter. I understand that it is close to his heart.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the issue of airspace, which has been a problem in the UK for many decades. We have had a glaring lack of an airspace strategy, so it is about time to deal with the issue in the round, along with noise and air quality. As a side issue, he reflected on the dodging of incoming elements when landing at Helmand and Basra, and of course we have the current issue of drones near aircraft, which needs to be addressed in an air strategy. I hope that the Minister will do something about that before there is a critical problem.

Returning to the main point, I am the MP for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, and the House will understand that we do not have the same issues as Heathrow or Gatwick. Indeed, we are keen to get more routes, because we have been left behind for many years, and we are delighted that British Airways is introducing a new route between Inverness and Heathrow. However, that does not mean that we have no understanding of the Gatwick and Heathrow situation. Personally, I lived under the Heathrow flight path for many years, enduring night flights

and Concorde, which was exceptionally noisy when it flew over my house. We understand the issue, but it is also important to understand that 90% of international visitors to Scotland - a big driver for the tourism economy - travel by air, with more than a third coming through Heathrow, which is therefore clearly of interest to us.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the need for the end of uncertainty about airport expansion. We heard the same from the right hon. Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman) and a number of hon. Members, all of whom said that they did not particularly want to talk about airport expansion, although they all mentioned it. I will come back to that subject in a moment.

The hon. Member for Strangford also talked about the need to look at the strategy of other Governments and Administrations. The Scottish Government are committed to understanding and managing the environmental impacts of air travel. They have acknowledged that noise can be distressing, affects quality of life and can have an impact on our health and environment. The existing legislation and controls are for vehicle noise and provide limited solutions to the problems of transportation noise. The Scottish Government are therefore making use of the European Union environmental noise directive, commonly known as END, to manage noise pollution, particularly from transportation sources.

The directive was transposed into Scots law in 2006. As per END, noise maps and noise action plans have been published for all major airport areas in Scotland. Delivery of the END objectives in Scotland has been achieved through extensive partnership working. The Scottish Government assumed responsibility for the co-ordination of noise mapping and action planning exercises, but they were heavily supported by individual working groups dealing with each of the major airports and other transportation systems.

Two rounds of noise mapping have been carried out by consultants AECOM. The consultants also host an interactive website on behalf of the Scottish Government, which displays all the Scottish noise mapping, action plans and statistics, allowing anyone to provide feedback or to raise an issue. The Scottish Government have received many positive comments and much feedback on their approach from others in the UK and throughout Europe. All that work has been informed by research at EU, UK and Scottish levels.

I want to discuss airport expansion, which is the issue that Members have been dancing around. The Scottish Government remain impartial on the Airports Commission's report. The Prime Minister, however, has put political convenience before UK connectivity by delaying his decision. The concern of local communities is understandable, given the stress and problems that can be caused by noise pollution, not to mention the potential disruption to everyday life, so the longer the Government delay their decision, the further the lives of people living around airports in the south-east will be plunged into uncertainty. That is all the more important given that the Airports Commission stated that aircraft were responsible for some negative effects on health, concentration and wellbeing, as we have heard from hon. Members today. That makes the conclusion of a decision even more important for those negatively affected.

The Prime Minister seems to have wriggled out of his commitment because he wants to help his party to win the mayoral election in London. He is not making a decision, at any scale, based on

commercial activity or the direct impact on the economies of the nations of the UK, nor is he considering the uncertainty for local communities. Yet the UK Government constantly promote a new runway as a national infrastructure project with huge ramifications for air connectivity to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the regions of England.

Any decision on the runway will have a massive impact on travel, exports, growth and jobs throughout the nations of our islands - not only London and the south-east of England but the rest of us. A further delay in taking a firm decision will mean that the UK continues to be an international laughing stock, as other nations yet again steal a march on investment and business and as people are stuck in the Government's departure lounge to nowhere. As I said, I believe the delay in the decision is because the Prime Minister wants to allow his party to win the mayoral election in London. The decision, however, should be made not for party political reasons but based on the right outcomes. Freezing a decision is wrong -

**Mr George Howarth (in the Chair)**

Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that the debate is about aircraft noise. Although he is not out of order, he is straying into a slightly wider argument.

**Drew Hendry**

Thank you for your advice, Mr Howarth. I had hoped to have made it clear why I was discussing those things - the effect on noise and air pollution, as well as the economics. They have been mentioned by all Members who have spoken today. However, I will conclude my remarks now.

Freezing the decision is wrong. The delay is not about noise or air quality. That is just a cold myth; this is about a Goldsmith.

**Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab)**

It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing the debate and, indeed, on how he introduced it. The matter is clearly of concern to many right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House. If I got my calculations right, 15 right hon. and hon. Members from the Back Benches have spoken today in interventions or speeches, which underlines that point.

Noise from aircraft operations is a real source of tension between airports, authorities, airlines and local communities. It is not only the annoyance or disruption, important though such things are, but the genuine public health concerns about ongoing exposure to aircraft noise. A report published in January this year by the Aviation Environment Federation drew on evidence accumulated over the past 20 years to highlight noise exposure and the way in which it can impact on someone's quality of life. Some studies go further and draw links to the possibility of many serious long-term health problems, to which many hon. Members referred: my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) and the hon. Members for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) and for Wealden (Nusrat Ghani). All that shows that we need more research to understand in more detail the many variables at play.

Addressing the question of noise is part of a much wider aviation puzzle, the pieces of which we need to join together. Challenges are coming to a head: noise challenges; modernising outdated airspace regulation; improving service access; promoting cleaner and greener aviation; and meeting various environmental challenges. The elephant in the room, relevant to all those things, is the question of airport capacity - the point made by the spokesperson of the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry).

Last year, the Prime Minister promised a response on the airport capacity question before Christmas. The hon. Gentleman speaking for the SNP made the point that the reasons for the delay might have been political - heaven forbid that any of us have that thought! The point is that when the delay was announced the Government at the time said they wanted time to consider the recommendations and the report of the Environmental Audit Committee. They are valid questions, and I wonder why the Government were not already asking them, between the publication of the commission report last summer and the announcement, or non-announcement, just before Christmas. I want to ask the Minister what work has been done since the Government delayed their decision to ensure that we get a decision this summer? Will he confirm that the Government will make a decision this summer, or could things take even longer?

We have been clear about the four criteria against which we will assess a decision, whenever the Government announce it: how it addresses airport capacity; how that works in relation to carbon obligations; local noise and other environmental impacts; and how the rest of the UK, not simply the south-east, will be affected. The third test relates directly to what we are talking about today - noise. The hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling was right to say that the debate today is not about the decision between Gatwick and Heathrow, but whichever is chosen the noise and air quality impact on communities must be addressed. My worry about noise is that all written questions that other Members and I have tabled on the issue seem to receive a stock response from the Government - that they are conducting an ongoing review of their airspace and noise policies. That is fine, but we need to know what it involves. Are the Government in touch with the World Health Organisation to take account of health guidance, and what is their current thinking about the Davies commission's recommendation on a ban on night flights? The messages coming from Heathrow and some airlines have been that they do not feel night flights can be ruled out, for all sorts of reasons, including connectivity.

### **Andy Slaughter**

I entirely agree with my hon. Friend's point. He may have seen that the question was raised in the other place earlier in the week about when the independent aviation noise authority recommended by the Airports Commission would be set up. The reply from the Government was, "We are not going to do anything until the decision has been made." That is a lacklustre approach.

### **Richard Burden**

My hon. Friend is right, and I will say a couple of words about the noise ombudsman, as it is sometimes referred to, in a little while.

The Government have commissioned Ipsos MORI research on public attitudes to aviation noise. If that is to inform the public debate, it needs to be published. My question to the Minister, again, is when it will be published.

I also want to ask the Minister about airspace redesign, a theme that has come up several times in the debate. Future approaches to the best use of airspace, bearing in mind changes and advances in technology, should inform issues of where to put new runways, and how they should be used. However, even without any airport expansion, the UK needs to modernise its outdated airspace management, in line with the EU single European sky programme. The benefits of doing that are obviously big, but the question is how we are to find a balance between dispersing routes between a number of corridors or concentrating on a number of routes. Either option has pros and cons for communities, and those that are negatively affected must be fairly compensated. However, whatever is done, a decision must be made. We have seen that trust can drain away when trials come out and people do not know what is going on. NATS, the Civil Aviation Authority, airports and communities need clear signals as to what will happen about airspace operations.

**Mrs Spelman**

The hon. Gentleman is a fellow Birmingham-based MP. Does he acknowledge that there was no compensation for people following the airspace changes - nor, indeed, following the runway extension?

**Richard Burden**

The right hon. Lady makes a valid point. The point I am making is that going forward we need a more comprehensive approach to such things. In appearances before the Transport Committee in February the Secretary of State and Department for Transport officials promised to publish a consultation on future airspace “soon”. What they would not say was whether the delay - and possibly further delays - in looking at expansion would lead to further delay in looking at airspace management. How soon is soon? What timetable is the Minister working on?

Whatever the Minister’s answers to the other questions that I have put to him both today and in writing, I must put it to him and the Government that delays, and the fact that there are difficult questions ahead, should not mean there is nothing we can do now. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith made the point correctly that an independent aviation noise authority could be established now, to act as an impartial mediator between airports and communities and help to restore trust and deliver the future of airspace operation. Nothing more is needed before that can be done. Sir Howard Davies and the Environmental Audit Committee endorsed the idea, and if the Minister endorsed it today it would certainly have the Opposition’s full backing, so let us get on with it. Will he do that?

Making use of existing capacity would also alleviate pressure on airspace. A key to utilising capacity is improving road and rail access to different international gateways in the UK. It is the Airport Operators Association’s top priority for 2016 and would bring about environmental and noise improvements around airports. Will the Minister back our calls for the National Infrastructure Commission to look at surface access to the UK’s international gateways?

Finally, I want to put it to the Minister that it is important to work with industry on the issue of noise. The Sustainable Aviation group has produced an aviation noise road map showing how aviation can manage noise from aircraft operations between now and 2050. It emphasises the importance of improving airspace structures and operational procedures, but also points out, importantly, that a key is future aircraft and engine technology. The noise road map shows that,

unless that new technology comes on stream and is used, noise output could double, even without expansion, in the coming years. What are the Government doing to encourage innovation, as well as the take-up of lighter, smaller aircraft such as the Boeing 787 and A350? Retrofitting noise-reducing devices to older fleets is also critical, and I think that the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling mentioned that. How are the Government promoting that? Does the Minister know what proportion of aircraft at each UK airport have not yet had such devices installed? If he does not know, when will he find out, and what will he do to put such measures in place?

I look forward to the Minister addressing those points. Vital questions have been raised today. At some point down the line the decision on expansion will come. It would be very useful to know when, but, irrespective of that, when will decisions be made on the various questions that I and other hon. Members have raised today?

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill)**

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat) on securing the debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) suggested that we might need the wisdom of Solomon. I cannot claim to have that, but I am wise enough not to stray into the area that the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), encouraged us to stray into. I shall focus on the issue of noise, if I may.

I want to assure the House that the Government are acutely aware that noise is a major environmental concern around airports. We know that communities feel strongly about the issue. I remind the House that, as set out in the aviation policy framework published in 2013, our overall policy is

“to limit and, where possible, reduce the number of people in the UK significantly affected by aircraft noise”.

How we define the word “significantly” is important, and I well understand the points that have been made about background ambient noise in more rural areas. In accordance with the aviation policy framework, we will continue to treat 57 dB as the average level of daytime aircraft noise that marks the approximate onset of significant community annoyance. That does not, however, mean that all people within that contour will experience significant adverse affects. Nor does it mean that no one outside the contour will consider themselves annoyed by aircraft noise. We are looking at the matter, and our consultation later in the year will consider policy in that area and particularly what it means for airspace change. Our overarching policy on the issue of noise remains as I have set out, and I think that the House will agree that it is the right approach to take.

We have a strong aviation sector here in the United Kingdom, and we should be proud of it, but we want to ensure that it does all it can to reduce the effect of noise on communities. I know that airports and other stakeholders, such as airlines, the CAA and NATS, all realise the importance of tackling noise if the industry is to continue to grow. The Government, too, have a role to play, which is why we set noise controls at Gatwick, Heathrow and Stansted to balance the benefits of aviation with the burdens they place on communities.

Aircraft noise is a difficult issue, as we have heard, and when changes take place, they can lead to less noise for some but a worsening for others. It can be particularly difficult for people who experience a noticeable change in noise, and it presents formidable challenges for those responsible for decisions. I am aware that in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling, and in others, people will have experienced changes in noise in recent years because of changes to where aircraft fly.

As my hon. Friend mentioned, a recent change to the joining point for aircraft approaching Gatwick from the east has created concerns for some residents. That change affected the point at which aircraft join the instrument landing system that leads down to the runway. Although that will have meant that some people have experienced fewer aircraft, for others it will have led to an increase in noise as a result of a narrower and more concentrated swathe on the final approach. As he will be aware, the Government believe that it is usually better to concentrate aircraft over as few routes as possible in order to minimise the number of people affected. That has been Government policy for many years and works well for many airports across the country.

Our current policy makes it clear, however, that there may be instances in which multiple routes, such as those that can offer respite for communities, can be better. The Government believe that those decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, with local communities informing the process where possible. I understand that in this instance, as the change was not to published airspace routes, communities were neither informed nor consulted before it occurred. For aircraft arriving in the UK, there are no set routes leading to the final approach. That is because arriving aircraft approach UK airspace in a random pattern and then have to be sequenced for safe operation by air traffic controllers. The change that took place in 2013 was to the procedures that air traffic controllers followed. It was therefore not subject to the Civil Aviation Authority's airspace change process, which needs to be followed when changes to airspace routes are proposed and requires consultation. Although there is no suggestion that NATS, Gatwick or the CAA acted improperly when making the change, as I have said, I believe that communities should be engaged when such changes are made.

I turn to one or two points that were made in the debate. My hon. Friend talked about changing the angle of approach. At the end of March, Heathrow airport trialled a 3.2° descent, but of course that requires significant pilot training and safety tests. As some airports trial that, more can follow. We need to look at pilot training and plane technology, and the report following that trial is expected over the summer. Having flown the 747 simulator into Heathrow at various descent angles, I can well understand some of the issues involved - in particular, the kinetic energy in a plane when it arrives on a steeper descent. That requires training, and there are noise issues when planes get nearer to the airport as greater braking power is needed. However, the descents are certainly not the same as I experienced when being taken into Kandahar airport some time ago.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling and my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin) both referred to the lack of a night flight ban at Gatwick. The Government recognise the impact of noise disturbance at night and, for that reason, set night flight restrictions at Heathrow, Stansted and Gatwick. The current restrictions end in October 2017, and we will consult on future arrangements later this year to ensure that the cost and benefits of night flights continue to be balanced.

My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham asked why stacking could not be done out at sea. The Gatwick arrivals review has recommended that holding areas should be enabled over the sea. Gatwick has accepted that, but it will take some years, as it will require widespread airspace and procedural change. Gatwick will be conferring with the CAA and NATS on that particular issue.

A number of Members raised the issue of the health effects on people on the ground. I have visited schools in the constituency of the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) and experienced the noise at first hand. I had a briefing earlier this week from the Aviation Environment Federation, which presented some very important research - not least from Imperial College, a well respected institution - on the effects on cardiovascular disease and other diseases.

The basic structure of UK airspace was developed more than 40 years ago and since then there has been a dramatic increase in the demand for flights. The future airspace strategy, which is being led by the CAA, is crucial to ensuring that the industry is efficient and can minimise its overall environmental impacts. The plan is to modernise UK airspace and deliver our contribution to the European Commission's single European sky by 2030 - the date by which we feel we should be able to do that. It is an ambitious plan designed around the use of modern technology, including more precise navigation.

Performance-based navigation can vastly improve the accuracy with which aircraft can fly a designated route, and airspace systemisation will mean that they follow a more predictable route, reducing the need for interference from air traffic controllers. That will not only make air travel safer but reduce emissions and journey times. It will also offer the chance to reduce noise for communities around airports by allowing routes that can accurately avoid built-up areas and maximising the rate at which aircraft can climb or descend. For those benefits to be realised, however, we need to ensure that when those essential changes take place, they work for communities as much as possible.

My officials are constantly reviewing Government policies on airspace and aviation noise. One thing I have asked them to consider is whether we can ensure that communities are informed and, when appropriate, consulted when such changes are to be made. They have also been working to deliver the right policies by engaging with all stakeholders, including representatives of local communities. I know that they have found that engagement valuable in ensuring that communities' interests are represented, and we will continue that dialogue when refining our policies.

**Ruth Cadbury**

I thank the Minister for his promise to consult communities. Should the Government be inclined to go ahead with runway 3 at Heathrow, will they consult the 300,000 residents of west London and beyond who would be affected? Those people are not currently affected by aircraft noise to the same extent as they would be in that situation.

**Mr George Howarth (in the Chair)**

May I ask the Minister to bear in mind that he needs to leave some time for the mover of the motion to sum up?

**Mr Goodwill**

Thank you, Mr Howarth.

Of course we will consult in that case.

The Government want to maximise the benefits from a strong aviation sector; it is good for the economy, bringing investment and employment to the UK and wider benefits to society and individuals. However, the Government recognise that that needs to be balanced against the costs to the local environment that more flights bring, with noise being a prime example. I thank the Members who have taken part in this debate; it has been useful to inform the Government of people's views, and I look forward to hearing the summing-up by my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling.

**Tom Tugendhat**

I thank the Minister for his words. I am grateful for the support that I have received from throughout the House today, and particularly for the many comments from Scottish National party and Labour Members. They have shown that this issue covers every party in every part of our great kingdom.

If I am honest, I am little disappointed that we have not yet had a better answer on what the words "significantly affected" mean, and that we have not had what I hoped we would have - a promise that the Civil Aviation Authority and NATS will take into account the communities on the ground when they are looking at the future airspace strategy. I think that is absolutely essential for all communities across our country.

In the closing few moments, I would like to pay a small tribute to Gatwick Obviously Not, a campaign group in my constituency that has worked tirelessly and fought very hard not only for communities in our area, but - as I hope this debate has recognised - for communities across our country that are suffering. Aviation noise recognises no boundaries of constituency, or indeed of town, borough or county.

Sadly, this issue will come back again and again, because although some have felt the need to argue against one project or another - it will come as no surprise that I would always argue against Gatwick's expansion - this is not about Gatwick or Heathrow. It is about the rights of citizens in our great country to be treated fairly and with justice when some of the planning decisions that are most important to them are taken. Were a motorway to be bulldozed through their back garden or a railway to be bulldozed under their land, they would have a right to be consulted. When the same is done in the air - when a motorway is put over their homes, their lives are disrupted, their sleep is interrupted and their children fail to get to school on time because they are tired - they get no say. That is surely wrong. I welcome the Minister beginning to answer that, and I know that this is a fight we will take forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved, That this House has considered the effect of aircraft noise on local communities.

Note: the URL for original document is:

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-04-20/debates/16042033000001/AircraftNoise>